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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes teaching strategies that promote positive interactions and scholastic success among Native American students. It is written from the perspective of a non-Native educator who has taught on reservations and at a federal boarding school. While the strategies are geared to the teaching of Native students, the underlying principles may be applicable to any student. Teachers must recognize the value of learning, see themselves as lifelong learners, and keep an open mind about other ways of doing things. Courses in Native Studies, multicultural education, and cross-cultural communication are useful. The five "B's" all have to do with Belief. Teachers must believe first in themselves as learners, and second in their students; they must hold high expectations for student success, and be aware of and sensitive to home and commmunity situations. Thirdly, teachers must believe that Native people are responsible for themselves and are capable of choosing their own future. Fourth, teachers must believe that the school and its staff can fulfill their mission. And finally, teachers must believe in what they teach, have a rationale for their subject materials, and recognize the need for relevance to students' lives. Personal vignettes illustrate each of these points. Seven resources for classroom techniques and activities are listed. (SV)

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Abstract

This article describes teaching strategies that promote positive interactions and scholastic success among Aboriginal students. It relies heavily on the author's teaching experiences and includes a personal synopsis which supports her approach. The teaching strategies are based on five beliefs: belief in yourself as a learner, belief in your students, belief in Aboriginal People, belief in the school and its staff members, and belief in what you are teaching.The resource list at the end may be a help to educators.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR...

Mary Ellen Campbell has taught social studies methodology courses for the Department of Curriculum Studies, College of Education, University of Saskatchewan. She has taught Grades 1 to 9 on various reserves throughout the province and has been co-ordinator and instructor of a job readiness program for early school leavers. She is a certified life-skills coach and has attended courses in alcohol and drug awareness and suicide intervention.

The Five B's of Success

for Teaching Aboriginal Students

Are there specific "secrets", once uncovered, that will lead any teacher to become successful? This is doubtful. However, there are strategies that may assist teachers in succeeding with their students.

The perspective here is that of a non-Aboriginal educator who taught and lived at an isolated Dene reserve, a Cree reserve, and a federal residential school. While the strategies are geared to the teaching of Aboriginal students, the underlying principles may be applicable to any student.

Successful strategies result in students who want to come to school, are actively involved in the teaching and learning of the subject matter, identify and achieve their own expectations and goals, feel good about themselves as students, and choose the ways in which they will use their education to prepare themselves for their future. Implementation of strategies suggested here can result in success in the classroom.

1. Believe in yourself as a learner

While the role of teacher may be defined as "one who teaches," we must recognize the value of learning and the goal to be life-long learners. How can we improve our courses unless we are continually learning new methods, information, and activities? One option is to allow our students to teach us. They have an endless source of knowledge to offer -- about themselves, their families, community, culture, history, and how they perceive the world around them. Instead of deciding that there is one specific way of doing things, we can open our minds to the fact that there are many ways.

When I received my first teaching job, I moved to an isolated Dene reserve, population 500 Dene Indians and 14 non-Aboriginal people (10 teachers, 2 nurses, and 2 Hudson Bay store employees). My knowledge of the Dene community, people, and culture was nil. (I did have one anthropology class in my background, but once I arrived on the reserve, my notes did not seem relevant.) The community became my teacher. Community members took me ice-fishing, showed me how to set snares, clean a caribou skin, invited me to weddings and wakes. Through conversations and living experiences, I was introduced to a different way of perceiving the world. Since I was willing to learn, they were willing to teach. Conversely, I prepared income tax forms, completed mail orders from the Sears catalogue, offered explanations on how to prepare specific foods, identified unfamiliar fruit such as coconuts and pineapples. We exchanged the roles of teacher and learner easily and often. I was able to utilize my new knowledge of the Dene culture in the classroom. My students were motivated by the fact that I wanted to learn about them. They were eager to share. The most meaningful compliment offered to me was, "I always thought teachers knew everything until I met you!"

Teaching in a reserve school is an opportunity to lose your preconceptions. The scenario is neither as depressing or uplifting as you may expect. If you have the opportunity, enroll in Native Studies, Indian education, cross-cultural communication, and multicultural courses. More importantly, learn from the Aboriginal people who are living the culture and can offer the insights you may need.

2. Believe in your students

If we do not believe advanced education is a realistic goal for Aboriginal students, our teaching style will reflect this position. However, if we are convinced that each of our students can and will be successful, this will become evident in our classrooms and to our students. As we encourage

students to believe in themselves, they will come to believe that they can achieve their goals. As teachers, having students succeed is important. We must perceive them as playing a vital role in their culture's future and want them to succeed in their personal endeavours. We need to genuinely care for them and realize that teaching involves a great deal more than merely the transfer of information.

Students at a federal residential school, range in age from 6 to 20 years. They may complete their entire schooling while living at the residence, or they may attend for a period as short as a month. The students live at the residence for various reasons. Their parents may have lived there and want the same education for their children, some are under the jurisdiction of Social Services, while others are attracted by the excellent reputation of the extra-curricular programs.

The students are permitted to go home once a month on "open" weekends. Parents, relatives or guardians may take their children home. However, some students arrive on Labour Day and do not return home until Christmas, as relatives may be unable to pick them up, or the travel distance is too great. The residence provides transportation at Christmas, spring break, and Easter.

The students live in dorms categorized by gender and age. For example, junior girls' dorm is for 6- to 10-year-olds of age. Two child-care workers are responsible for approximately 20 individuals within one dorm.

Students living in a residence pose interesting challenges. Since they do not go home at night to share their successes or problems with a parent, the teacher may be the one who cares and will listen -- a friend. At Christmas pageants, sports achievement nights, and Brownie banquets, teachers are invited to share in the honoring of the students. Conversely, the child-care workers attend parent day at school, discussing report cards and other school-related matters. Communication between the workers and the teachers is important, each sharing concerns regarding the students.

As teachers, we are there to learn and empathize with our students. We become aware of situations in the home or community. We may be called on to be a friend, confidante, parent, or advisor. Helping students succeed implies that intellectual, emotional, spiritual and physical needs will be recognized and a balance among these needs will be established and maintained.

Alcohol abuse is a serious problem for many people. The trauma and violence associated with it was a reality for many of my students. I quickly recognized that I had to view the "total person", not only the "student" aspect. My background, knowledge and skills did not prepare me to deal with their personal struggles. Fortunately, there are many qualified people and resources to help students cope. Guidance counsellors, community health workers, school committee members are a few. The Saskatchewan Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission offers summer school courses on addictions and suicide, as well as maintaining an extensive resource library.

Instead of judging the behaviour exhibited by the family or community (in most instances, regardless of the home situation, the students want to stay with their families), I attempted to find ways in which the students could succeed in school and feel good about themselves. I firmly believe that scholastic success greatly depends upon the students' self-concept and self-esteem. If they do not feel good about themselves, they will not do well at school. The promotion of positive self-esteem became part of my teaching style. Excellent resources in this area are 100 ways to enhance self-concept in the classroom and Where Eagles Fly (see Resources).

It is important to address the needs of each student. Differences exist among individuals, reserves, and ethnic groups. Talk to your students, their parents, and community members.

3. Believe in Aboriginal People

As teachers, we need to believe that Aboriginal people are responsible to and for themselves. In some instances, educators may perceive their responsibilities to include "saving" the people and their culture based on the belief that they are unable to look after themselves. Aboriginal people have the capability and the right to choose their path for the future.

Our role as educators includes introducing our students to past and present events that may shape their future. Community members, elders, parents, and the students themselves may present their own personal experiences and perceptions of the problems and solutions facing their people.

An excellent resource kit on Aboriginal people is the TAWOW social studies kit. The students I have taught were eager and motivated to learn about events involving Aboriginal people. Additional resources include the National Native Role Model Program, Sacred Tree curriculum, Keepers of the Earth.

The students are proud of their Aboriginal identity. They become keen, actively involved in discussions, willing to share personal incidents when the class was addressing Aboriginal issues. They wanted to learn about their past, present, and the influences molding their future.

4. Believe in the School and Staff Members

The belief that students will succeed is relayed to all those involved. We want the school and our fellow staff members to succeed, too.

It is acknowledged that Aboriginal people may encounter prejudice. That the teachers of Aboriginal students confront discrimination may not be as widely recognized. Teachers from reserve schools are often faced with attitudes such as: "Why don't you get a real teaching job?" "Why teach those kids, they won't use an education?" "Couldn't you get a job anywhere else?" Our jobs are valuable and worthwhile, and our students deserve the best education available to them.

Of equal importance is the belief that each staff member is indispensable. A school staff is a team working together to achieve common goals. Some of my fellow staff members are graduates of the various Aboriginal teacher education programs. Comments were made that these teachers possessed a "watered-down" Bachelor of Education degree. If we believe these misconceptions, our interactions toward our fellow staff members will reflect this. Every teacher and school possess strengths and weaknesses.

5. Believe in what you are teaching

Teachers need a rationale for every topic they teach. If we do not know, how can we answer the students' question, "Why are we studying this?" Within our teaching philosophy we must include the belief that the topic should be relevant to our students' lives. If it is not, we adapt our teaching methods and subject matter, ensuring that it is relevant to their lifestyles, aspirations, and community context. The subject matter will initially stem from the areas the students know best and then expand to other cultures, traditions, and communities.

The students living at the residence come from various reserves, towns, and cities. Instead of looking specifically at the residence's home community, the communities represented by the students have to be recognized. Assignments give students the opportunity to research, re-tell, and present information about themselves.

Whenever I am questioned about my successful teaching experiences, I refer to these five strategies. They have assisted students in becoming successful and, of equal importance, helped me to enjoy my role as teacher.

Teaching and living with the Aboriginal people has been the most profound learning experience of my life - to date! If you have such an opportunity, enjoy it!

Resources

Caduto, Michal J. (1988). Keepers of the Earth. Golden: Colorado: Fulcrum.
. Activities and text detailing the Aboriginal perspective of the environment.

Canfield, Jack. (1976). 100 ways to enhance self-concept in the classroom. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall.
. Over 100 activities to promote positive self-esteem.

Murdock, Maureen. (1987). Spinning Inward. Boston: Shambhala Publications Inc.
. Guidebook for using guided imagery for learning, creativity, and relaxation in the classroom.

Henry, Jim. (1987). Where Eagles Fly. Red Earth, Saskatchewan: Okimaw Development Inc.
. A self-esteem workbook for Aboriginal students.

Sealy, Bruce D. (1979). TAWOW. Agencourt: The Book Society of Canada Limited.
. A multimedia social studies kit on Native Studies.

_____. (1988). The Sacred Tree Curriculum. Lethbridge, Alberta: Four Worlds Development Project.
. Activities, legends to introduce the universal teachings about human beings cherished by Native people.

National Native Role Model Program
Kahnawake Social Services Resource Centre
Box 927
Kahnawake, Quebec
J0L 1B0

. Posters, pamphlets, buttons and newsletter highlighting 10 successful Native people.

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